Abstract: Senior student describes their experience as a negotiator with the administration for Middlebury's Gaza Solidarity Encampment, the physical set-up of the encampment, a workshop on decentering whiteness, other workshops and education, efforts to center Palestine in the encampment's decision-making processes. They also discuss workshops and teachings on Palestine at the encampment, the value of participants' varied skill sets, regular class learning on social movements and protest in relation to their experience at the encampment, the way the experience changed their sense of political self, and the way working towards a shared goal brought students together across difference.

Q: To start, why don't you tell me a bit about your involvement with the encampment?

A: Yeah. I joined the encampment in what was the second wave. There was a group of people that set it up that morning, early on, and then I came maybe an hour afterwards with some other people. So there were some initial people laying the ground, and it grew from there. My place in all of that is I came as someone who wasn't really involved in SJP at all, but within a few weeks or days of the encampment had been really affected by recent news and had decided that I wanted to get involved. And that interest coincided with the encampment starting. So that's how I got on. Would it be helpful to talk about my roles in the encampment too?

Q: Yeah, that'd be great.

A:Okay. So I started off with de-escalation and being one of the people who was aware of people who were around the encampment, coming into the encampment, keeping an eye out. Pretty often there'd be students who were lurking around, or maybe someone would take a picture. And especially at the beginning we were really discouraging that, so we had a lot of conversations with students saying *Her look, we're not gonna do that, here's why* … So yeah, especially at the beginning I was seeing where I could help out as the safety side of things. And then after a little bit, when it became time to start negotiations with the administration, the plan was to send in a group of students who were not what the administration would expect. Who wouldn't be familiar faces in the context of Palestinian Liberation. And I was one of those students who went in, and then for the remainder of the encampment I was involved with negotiations and that side of things. And also I was helping to interpret what our options and what best strategies were.

Q: How did you feel in those first few days? Were you alone? Were you talking to other people? What was it like?

A: Everything was such a group effort. I hadn't ever been trained in de-escalation before, but that was one of the first workshops the encampment had. Someone came to the encampment – a community member – and talked through deescalation strategies, what that means, how it might look at the encampment. And those first couple days were really stressful – there were a lot of unknowns. While this was happening we were thinking about and really engaging with events that were happening in Gaza at the time, and what that meant, and constantly reminding ourselves why we were there, but then also being face with news or pictures or videos of news

and what was happening at other encampments across the country, and counter protests and police brutality. We knew the Middlebury contect was different from other contexts, to an extent, but we also didn't know that the police could've shown up at any time, and we had cars honking at us and yelling at us, and you never know what that might turn into. It was a surreal and stressful time, especially at the beginning there. Because there was so much unknown, and especially as we were figuring stuff out as a group, but also the broader context of figuring out what could happen and what to be ready for.

Q: Do you remember doubting your place there in all that? Did that stress ever make you want to go home?

A: No. The hesitancy was deciding to join in the first place. Once I was there for a little bit longer, it affirmed my decision more. A thought that I had, especially with regard to the police or being arrested, was that *I believe what we were doing was right.* We were told we were not breaking any rules of the College outside the camping rule which they were willing to let go, so I was like *If they were going to call the police on us that would be itself unjust,* and that would be reason enough for me to stay. Also there were some considerations around students on campus who are really impacted by this issue but couldn't be at the encampment because their immigration status or their identities, and so I had a recognition that I'm in a position when I can be here, and the worst thing that can possibly happen to me isn't actually that bad. And that affirmed my decision to stay, especially through those stressful moments.

Q: You talked about being tuned into the news of what was happening in Gaza during the encampment. How did this awareness show up in the encampment itself?

A: Yeah. Twice a day we'd have encampment meetings. And those would start with centering ourselves on Gaza. So someone would share the events of the last 24 hours, what attacks had taken place, how many had died, who had died. And a reminder of the overall scale. That was done to not get lost in *We are doing this protest because we want to* and to really remind us that it's not about that or whatever that brings up, it's really about *why* we're there. And also, that that would really inform our decisions. We're not deciding on things necessarily for whats best for the encampment itself. The enchantment's there for a reason, and we're trying to act in accordance with that reason.

Q: Can you think of an example of how that centering on Gaza showed up and affected an instance of decision making?

A: Yeah. I think it's a matter of a balance between what the things you do are. Like, if you were to do something super disruptive on campus, what's the point of that? Is that to gain a bunch of attention for ourselves? One of our big banners said *Keep Talking About Palestine*, and the idea is not centering discussions around the encampment on the encampment itself, but instead seeing it as an opportunity to really force the campus to have conversations and dialogue around [Gaza]. So where it came up in decision making was like: *Are we doing this for us*

because we want the encampment to be a thing and we want to be talked about? And the answer was *No. We want them to talk about Palestine.*

Q: Right. And how were you guys, as the encampment, trying to get people to talk about Palestine? Did that show up in workshops? How did that show up?

Q: Something I appreciated about our encampment was that the idea was it was an open space, and anyone from campus was welcome to come. And there were obviously a bunch of students who wanted to talk about things and a lot of students who had worked really hard to educate themselves. And the workshops as well – faculty who were speaking, knowledgeable students who were speaking, community members who came to speak, and really encouraging anyone, even if they're not quite at the point where they want to pitch a tent with the encampment, could come for an hour in the afternoon after their class and learn a bit. It was clear that a lot of Middlebury students – myself included in a lot of ways – just didn't really understand what was happening in that moment, but also a lot of history behind it. And the history of both the Palestinian Liberation Movement, but also the history of Zionism and Israel and Palestine before. So the open nature and focus on education were really key to that.

Q: Right. So professors, community members, and students were all giving information in that way?

A: Yeah. There were recurring workshops like *Palestine 101,* which especially at the beginning had really amazing turnout. That was something a few students who, for their own intentions to learn or identities and backgrounds, were qualified to lead those workshops. But also specific professors whose areas of study either directly or indirectly related were able to give really interesting presentations on how their knowledge connected. And that showed up with historical lenses, more sociology lenses, there was an interesting conversation about policing. And then also community members. The Palestinian Coalition in Vermont, which is made up of a couple different groups and some of them are connected directly or indirectly to the Middlebury community, so some folks from there stopped by. The Jewish Voice for Peace chapter in Middlebury, which is a bunch of mothers who were around, not leading workshops but supporting. It really indicated broader support and the importance for a lot of people of the encampment existing.

Q: Were you participating in a lot of those workshops? Do you feel like you learned a lot?

A: Totally. Yeah. Palestinian Liberation is still a topic that I have so much to learn about. But coming into the encampment I had really made an effort to learn, preceding the encampment immediately. But it was really when I got there that I learned from students and also on my own as a part of all that. And I think that's a case for a lot of students at Middlebury, who, given their values and what they cared about. They saw what was happening and were like *Yeah, what's happening now is definitely wrong*, *but I don't have the history or political context for [understanding] this,* and I think that the encampment for a lot of students ended up as an

opportunity [to learn], both directly, through workshops and things, but also indirectly, through students who see us exist and then on their own read or watch things to learn.

In the moment, [education] was a thing I heard talked about a lot. We were like, *we want this to be an open space,* and then reminding people at workshops of that, and then really putting an effort to bring different speakers to come and talk. To have programming.

Q: Was programming discussion based, too? Or lecture style?

A: Everyone who spoke structured things a little differently. Some were more discussion-based, some more lecture-based with a Q&A, and some wanted to facilitate more discussion. So it was a mix.

Q: Right. Had you had experiences in other activist spaces before? And if so, how did the encampment feel similar or different?

A: I haven't engaged in any other activism that had the same… stakes, or direct set of threats or concerns, or the same awareness that the police could come at any time, or what a counterprotestor could do. That was unique. And also the fact that it was all encompassing. As opposed to organizing some kind of rally, and then you go to the rally, and then it ends, which is a common experience for a lot of demonstrations. Not all, but many. Whereas the encampment was like *I live here now. And I'm gonna spend almost all of every day at this place.* The nature of that was unique to me.

Q: How do you think that immersive nature of the encampment affected your experience of it? And how did that set up your expectations for future organizing and activism?

A: A discussion I had with some other students towards the end of the encampment was about how to continue the sense of community that was fostered in the encampment. And reflecting on the fact that building that is so much easier when there's a physical space. And then asking the question of how to do that without the physical space [in the future] shows just how important the physical space is. I think bringing a bunch of people together with different backgrounds, different skill sets, different levels of knowledge, but shared values and some sense of a shared mission or purpose is a really unique thing that's really hard to replicate. Because once you're all together, conversations just happen. Personal connections happen. Feeling really connected to people or tied to people that you might not have otherwise interacted with at Middlebury, and feeling an intimate connection to them is hard to replicate, and is one of the things I think is broadly appreciated about the encampment by some of the people that were a part of it.

Q: Could you speak more on those connections with people you might otherwise not have known? About how it felt or manifested, and also how it was different from other times at Middlebury? And if you want, you could answer in a story, if that's easier.

A: Yeah. I think there are a lot of ways to answer that. It's a great question. A way to answer that on the lighter side is like, at night, after workshops and the final meeting of the day happened, everyone kind of dispersed. Some people would go to the library to study, others would head to their tent to go to sleep, but there were often pockets of people who were hanging out. And those conversations usually were a combination of events directly pertaining to the encampment, discussing like *The administration said this today,* or *did you see that email, Oh, I'm noticing this, what do you think about this?* But also there were moments where there was laughter, and a sense of happiness. That's the side of the encampment that isn't – shouldn't be remembered. Won't be remembered. But I think was an integral part of the experience. That community building, in the moments that weren't necessarily what the encampment was there for or about, but also totally is what the encampment was there for to an extent. That was a really important way to foster those connections. I think at Middlebury it often happens that once people have their friends they silo off. I know it's a small school and tight-knit community or whatever, but also people have their worlds. The fact that I didn't have any kind of personal relationship with a lot of people involved in the encampment before it happened was a testament to that, but then also the fact that a bunch of people were there together and knew that there were degrees of trust and also the sense of shared experiences to get there and to be there was a way to bond. And I think that broke down a lot of what might have otherwise been social divides. That was really cool to see.

Also, whenever things were or weren't going well in the encampment and how people discussed that, like, there were times when we had decisions to make about, like taking down the encampment, or what we wanted different logistical things to look like, and that's where we had real direct problem solving conversations happen. And there were a bunch of people, and maybe different opinions informed by different skill sets and backgrounds, and seeing people have those discussions in a way that was at times maybe like what Middlebury would want liberal arts students to do– to have those conversations directly– was a really interesting way to connect. The nature of working through those problems and differences I think also really brought people together.

Q: So conflict and the need to clarify and communicate positions brought people closer? Even the decision to take down the encampment?

A: Yeah, that definitely could've gone differently. There were plenty of things that could've gone differently if it were to happen again. But, yeah. A lot of the time when there disagreements, it did end up being really constructive, and a decision was reached that, I don't know, at least I felt content with, and at least from my point of view it seemed like there was general acceptance of, but then, that's not to say that it was always like that. I don't mean to paint a picture of this utopia that existed on campus, because it certainly wasn't that either.

Q: Can you think of an example of a time you guys had to make a decision, and what that process looked like, and what about it you found to be positive?

A: Yeah. It's crazy this is all almost a year ago now. So, there were decisions that were a much broader group and decisions that were a much tinier group. My perspective is one around the negotiations and what that looked like. We met with the administration one-fewer than the number of days, or two-fewer, the encampment was up. There was the initial meeting, and then another meeting, and then basically the encampment had an email inbox and there were a couple of people monitoring the email inbox, which was our primary point of contact with the administrators. So we had expressed interest in meeting with [the administrators], and they had responded pretty immediately that they wanted to meet, and no-one saw that email until most people were already asleep in the encampment. And in the email they said they could meet the next day, and then a decision that had to be made amongst some of the negotiators and the other people who were awake at the time which was like *Do we have this meeting or not? Are we prepared for it? Should we have it?* And this was just past the midpoint of the encampment, so it would have been a pretty big meeting in terms of progressing towards our goals. There were reasons to meet with them, there were reasons to not meet with them, there were plenty of reasons to explain why we didn't want to meet with them, 'cause we obviously didn't want to say *Oh, we totally didn't see your email!* And so that was a discussion at which I flip flopped a few times about what was right, but eventually at its best you could say the group decided on responding to the email with the intention to meet, and at its worst people were just really exhausted and eventually said, like, *I'm really fine either way*. Regardless, we made the decision to meet with them the next day. And I think it was over the weekend, which was some of the controversy. And that meeting happened, and I think it was good that it did, because we made a bunch of progress there. Yeah. That's an instance of a bunch of people with differing opinions coming together and discussing and coming to a conclusion.

Q: Right. What setting did that decision making happen in? Was it a tent? Outside?

A: Are you familiar with the overall layout of the encampment?

Q: Tell me anyway.

A: Yeah. So, the first structure to go up was the tent in the middle of the green. And that expanded a lot, and at one point was two little canopy things and ended up getting bigger and having walls, and ended up being a pretty well designed structure. Which was great, because there were a bunch of students who were really good at doing that kind of thing who just jumped right in and wanted to do it. So there was that main tent, and that's where workshops were, that's where meetings were held. There was also the supply tent that had a bunch of water and food and extra tents and things. Then there were two other larger tents that were for classes that could be hosted at the encampment or clubs that wanted to meet there.

So that specific conversation happened in the big tent at night. There were always people, as it got later, on watch, every hour of the night, but also people who would just linger around and maybe who were doing work in the tent or hanging out. What happened was, we were like *Are we sure we didn't get an email back?* And one of the students who had access to the email checked and we were like *Crap, we got emailed like 7 hours ago*. So that was the setting – it

was a bunch of people sitting on the floor, or in folding chairs around a laptop discussing the pros and cons and what a meeting would look like.

Q: Right. Were you ever on night watch duty?

A: No. I was signed up for a shift right before we decided who was going to go to negotiations, and then I was going to go first thing the next morning, and then another awesome student was like *Oh, you should get a good night's sleep. I'll wake up for you.* So I never did.

Q: In our pre-interview you mentioned protest and the encampment in relation to some learning you'd done in your classes, student protests of the Vietnam War specifically. If that's interesting to talk about, I'd love to hear about that, too.

A: What was interesting about the connection to class and education is I had taken a class the previous semester with Bill McKibben who was a controversial figure within the encampment because he wrote an op-ed about it and also had a pretty liberal perspective on that moment, but that aside, the class we had taken was pretty much centered on tracking social movements between the end of World War II and Ronald Regan's election win in 1980. We discussed the Women's Movement, the Environmental Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and also Anti-War stuff. And one of the reads for that class was the *Strawberry Statement,* which is a [fictionalized version of a] first person account of one of the students at Columbia when they occupied a building, and kind of that moment but also other things, and also that student becoming involved in a broader radical movement and his experience with that. And I think it was interesting to study that period in an academic context and then live through a period that I think many would say paralleled that moment in history in a lot of ways. There were a couple other students in the encampment who had also taken that class and studied that era, and it was interesting to reflect on those connections. In a lot of ways it felt like we were using some of what Middlebury had taught us to then stage this protest at Middlebury. Which was kind of fulfilling. That's the whole idea, right? So yeah. I think there were definitely instances of those kinds of things showing up in discussions. Another thing was there were students with some knowledge of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and there were discussions about learning from that. One thing that had been identified was that some of the l;eaders from Occupy said that their decentralized power structure was one of the downfalls of their movement. And at the encampment, there was an effort to maintain a decentralized power structure, but especially later on there was a kind of smaller group of students who were really discussing and leading some of the decision making. And the idea was that any bigger decisions were then brought to the group, and also there was an idea that anyone could attend those [smaller] meetings, but in practice maybe that wasn't totally true. So there was definitely knowledge and academic learning being applied to the encampment.

Q: Were there more specific strategies from class learning you brought?

A: I don't think so. What I shared about the students who had learnings from the Occupy movement, or one of those more direct instances, a lot of students were also really informed by

Marxist theory or Maoist theory at times. I don't remember any instances with specifically [calling upon] the Vietnam War stuff. *The Strawberry Statement* was about that and also some other things, but that book was less so a guide for how to do that and more so a story of a very strange and troubled student. So it was less directly informing a decision and more just a reflection that this kind of thing had happened before, and what that meant more broadly.

Q: Yeah. Were you excited about being in tradition with some of those movements you'd learned about in class?

A: Yeah. There were moments when I felt like what we were doing was cool. But there was really an effort not to get lost in that. Because I think that pretty quickly leads down a path of white saviorism which is something that we talked about, and there were times when you were hearing people say things like *Oh, this would be such a big deal for* us *if we got Middlebury to do this*, and any kind of logic like that was pretty quickly identified as not aligned with our mission of why we were there. And also innately in line with that is thinking about experiencing whiteness. We had a de-centering whiteness workshop. One of the members identified that a lot of students who were taking up a lot of space in conversations were white, and there were other students whose backgrounds were more marginalized or maybe who were more directly connected to the conflict who didn't have the space to speak up in the same way, and how to define that as a real problem. So yeah, I think there were moments, especially for students who had studied some of this stuff, that were like *Oh, we're kind of doing "thing,"* but also recognizing that that really isn't what should be driving any kind of decision making or really be too top of mind. I also feel a sense, to some extent, that our encampment was, I don't know, a pretty different thing than the encampments that existed at a lot of larger schools. And not to minimize the Middlebury experience, or anything that was accomplished, but also our encampment with a bunch of gear room tents that had, in the end, even though we didn't know it at the time, essentially no direct counter protests, was a pretty different movement to be part of than what *The Strawberry Statement* was actually about, which was pretty brutal and had lots of physical violence, or what was happening at a lot of other encampments. So I struggle to feel too high on any pedestal about what MIddlebury was able to accomplish because it was a pretty different experience than a lot of other activism that is really worthy of celebrating and appreciating. Ours was in practice and in the end a little bit different.

Q: Makes sense. I'd love to hear more about the Decentering Whiteness workshop and its effects. And also about its genesis.

A: Yeah. I'll say first that there were a couple things that happened but they happened too late at the encampment. One way a prioritizing of self-care and recognizing that people weren't sleeping enough and were taking on a lot of stress, and therefore weren't functioning at their best or in the most healthy way, especially in the last couple days of the encampment, and then there was also being really intentional about recognizing one's identity, and whiteness. And all those things happened later than they should've. The encampment had a set of principles, and I believe one of them was decentering whiteness, so that was on the board from the very beginning, so it was something we talked about but which probably should've been more

intentional. Which is probably a reflection on the nature of the Middlebury student body that was involved. But yeah, the workshop that did happen was not a big encampment advertised thing but a smaller group of students who were involved in some of he more day-to-day strategy or thinking about what was happening more logistically, and it was a group of white students led by white students who discussed a combination of personal experiences and some broader… not like “theory,” but concepts to be aware of. And then there was open discussion with partners, one-on-one, and then we wrote things down and discussed. And it was good. It happened right before the encampment ended, I believe, but yeah. It should’ve happened sooner.

Q: Yeah. In that time between when it happened and when it ended, were you thinking about stuff you learned at the workshop? Or did it seem other people were? Was it coming up?

A: I think so. I think conversations looked a bit different, and there was more intentional effort to step back and create space for others. It’s one of those things that anyone who was taking up more than their fair share of space wasn’t doing so knowingly or intentionally. And I think everyone was pretty committed to adhering to that principle, and I think it had an impact, but again, it was very much toward the end and didn’t have as much of an impact as it could have earlier.

Q: Right. Before we wrap up, is there anything that feels important that you've taken and reflect on from your experience? Treat this as expansively as you wish!

A: Yeah. There’s the encampment itself and then there’s the movement it represents. The encampment itself I think reaffirmed how inspired I am by being in community with others with shared values and passions, how much I appreciate doing work that I deem to have meaning, I’m definitely missing that right now at this stage in my life. But in terms of the movement itself – this is going to sound dramatic – I feel like being a part of the encampment, and a lot of the education that came in conjunction with that kind of radicalized me. And I think the reflection that a democrat was president at the time when all of this was happening shatters a lot of conceptions that I would’ve had, especially when I was in Middle School or High School, and that were sort of starting to crack over the course of [my time at] Middlebury and as I learn more about the world, but I think really being confronted with the fact that this set of things that are really horrible and oppressive are happening right now, have been happening for a while in slightly different forms, and have all been enabled by the political group that identifies as the “left party,” the “party of justice and equality” or whatever, there are a lot of cracks that show in that that I haven’t been able to get over. And I think the way I identify politically, the way I plan to engage with politics in the future, is pretty comprehensively changed for good.

Q: Yeah. Is there anything else you want to say?

A: Yeah. It’s interesting to have this conversation more removed from the actual encampment happening. And I appreciate that, because after it happened there was a lot of frustration with how it ended, and since Middlebury has walked back on some things, and that’s really, really frustrating. But there were also some victories that happened as a result of it, and I think that a

lot of the conversations that were had had a real lasting impact. Some of the encampment's demands were met, and I think that in itself is worthy of appreciation and celebration. But I think what's really cool about the encampment is the way it came together. And the fact that it was a smaller group of students who did all the work – to get faculty involved so we had advisors to make sure that jail support and legal support was ready, set up the channels t a bunch of donations, we raised a bunch of money pretty much immediately, the logistics behind getting a bunch of alumni to sign a letter in support. And then as more students came into the fold and were interested in what was happening and wanted to be a part of it and bringing their skill sets. Like how to set up tents. How to manage the electricity so we could have power in the tent. Things like that. Different skill sets, different backgrounds, different ways of thinking, logical structures. Different ways of communicating. Also, different social circles all coming together under a shared mission, a shared set of values to do a pretty bi thing. In terms of what's happened at Middlebury, especially in recent years, this is a notable moment of student activism. And it was really cool to witness. That's a lot of what was great about it– Seeing a bunch of people come together to do something.